Center of Studies on Politics and Society
Department of Social Sciences and Communication

CSPS Working Paper Series

1
issue 2
2011

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Historical Comparison and Political Contention. The Sociological Analysis of Collective Action and Political Praxis in Antonio Gramsci and Charles Tilly

University of Salento

ISSN 2239-7434
ISBN 978-88-8305-084-8

Center of Studies on Politics and Society - Working Paper Series
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http://siba2.unisalento.it

eISBN 978-88-8305-084-8 (electronic version)

http://siba-ese.unisalento.it

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to analyze the scientific approach to the analysis of political processes in Antonio Gramsci's and Charles Tilly's works. The attempt to compare the work of two culturally different scholars may seem unorthodox, but it is not. Gramsci and Tilly are two thinkers working in different historical contexts and from different cultural perspectives, nevertheless their intellectual elaborations have several points of contact that allow us to build a theoretical framework that may be useful for a systematic analysis of political change. Gramsci was a Marxist intellectual and political leader working in fascist Italy, in a context of crisis of democratic institutions; Tilly, on the contrary, was a liberal scholar working in the United States of the second half of the twentieth century, but both are united by a common attention to the dynamics of conflict and by their commitment to produce theories that might be rooted in historical processes. Scholarly attention has focused largely on the political originality of the work of Gramsci, yet, in our opinion, his categories may also be a useful analytical tool within a sociological framework. Gramsci, on the one hand, developed a critical attitude towards evolutionistic and determinist conceptions of history by focusing on the historical relevance of the collective will of popular masses in a dialectical relationship with the system of power. Tilly, on the other hand, reacted to the functionalistic and synchronic sociology, which was in part a product of the Durkheimian structuralist approach, by focusing on the relevance of the elaboration of a historically grounded social theory. Both of them elaborated a theory in the study of contentious dynamics by adopting a historical comparative methodology.

1. Two very different yet related scholars

Comparing the intellectual output of two scholars is always a hard effort because you have to deal with the complexity of a thought expressed in its specificity. *A fortiori*, it is difficult to compare two historically and culturally different scholars. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to identify the connecting elements in the intellectual production of Antonio Gramsci and Charles Tilly, two authors who lived in different historical and social contexts and were, in many ways, culturally distant. Gramsci was a communist political leader who wrote from the cell into which he had been imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime between 1926 and 1937. Tilly, instead, operated in a democratic context, the United States, in the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas the first is mainly concerned with identifying the historical conditions for the construction of a revolutionary process in the West within a Marxist perspective, the latter is interested in studying social change starting from the phenomena of conflict and mobilization, but within a liberal democratic frame. Two authors seemingly incomparable but actually united by a common reaction to a certain evolutionistic sociology that has its roots in the mechanicistic positivism of the nineteenth century, culminating in the form of the structural-functionalist paradigm in the twentieth century. Both are interested in the dynamics of conflict expressed by an organized civil society that reacts to the dominant system of power. Both finally identify in history, and especially in historical comparison, a basic analytic tool for social scientists in the prospect of tracing some regularities and limited generalizations. We will focus on these aspects of analogy, always trying to historically contextualize the thought and the intellectual production of these two scholars.

In order to understand the relevance of Antonio Gramsci's social theory, it must be contextualized in the broader historical framework of theoretical Marxism. Strongly influenced at a young age by Antonio Labriola's Marxism (Badaloni 1975; Paggi 1979), Gramsci soon developed a critical attitude towards the kind of determinist Marxism as expressed by the principal leaders of the Second International, such as Kautsky, as well as by some theorists of the Bolshevik revolution, such as Plekhanov and Bukharin. In fact, from Kautsky to Stalin, a whole generation of Marxist thinkers had supported the argument that the historical process obeyed specific laws of necessity, so that it was possible to imagine the transition to socialism as an automatic process, inscribed in history. The masses of workers were *de fac-*

to deprived of their subjectivity in the revolutionary process. Such interpretation of Marx's historicism in an evolutionary key presupposes the historical irrelevance of class action carried out by the proletarian masses.

Antonio Gramsci, by providing a different interpretation of Marxist theory, counters the automation of evolution with the collective will of the masses. Not incidentally, Marx himself in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach states: «The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it» (Marx 1958, vol.2, 405). Gramsci, through Marx, emphasizes the human element that realizes itself through the organized action of civil society. Also Marx certainly risked ending in some forms of determinism, by predicting the capitulation of the capitalist system under the influence of the contradictions expressed by the system itself; yet, in his work, he would always stress the aspect of driving force represented by the political consciousness of the masses. Karl Kautsky, on the contrary, long considered the guardian of Marxist orthodoxy, offeres a mechanistic interpretation of Marx in stating that: «Marx and Engels recognized that revolutions are not made at will. They come with inevitable necessity, when the conditions which render them necessary exist, and are impossible so long as those conditions, which develop gradually, do not exist» (cited in Fried, Sanders 1964, 436). Kautsky's view clearly denies the role of human intervention in the historical process, thus rejecting the possibility of historical alternatives. Such an objectivist theory of history is also central to the thinking of Plekhanov and Bukharin in the process of Marxism Bolshevization. As Salamini observes (1981, 4-5), «From a theory of capitalism structure and development, [it] becomes the theory of the creation of new historical formations, that is, new forms of human organizations and institutions». Gramsci's aim is, therefore, to restore the unity between political theory and praxis.

Leninism had already represented, in a certain way, a valid response to the mechanicism of the Second International, by emphasizing the party's role of political leadership, but had been unable to explain the failure of the revolutionary perspective in the West. According to Gramsci, the core of the problem does not lie so much in the non-realization of the objective historical conditions, as in the absence of a subjective realization of the objective conditions for social transformation. It is precisely this insistence on the subjective elements in Marx's theory that differentiates Gramsci from Lenin. According to the Gramscian perspective, social transformation is a fun-

ction of the creative role of the masses and of their political ability to articulate a revolutionary consciousness. From this point of view, the intellectuals' role becomes crucial. The Italian philosopher states that «every revolution has been preceded by an intense labor of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men» (Gramsci 1977, 12). The basic themes of his writings, therefore, concern the clear rejection of mechanistic and economistic interpretations of Marx's doctrine and the adherence to a fully historicist and humanist form of Marxism. Marxism is for Gramsci not only an economic science, but first and foremost a worldview that points to an intellectual and moral reform of society. This goal is unattainable without the collective will created in political praxis. The process of social reformation is, therefore, the result of the historical transformation of the "economic class" into a "historical class" that takes place in the dialectical relationship between the masses and the intellectuals.

Revolution is for Gramsci primarily a process of cultural reform. Therefore both intellectuals and the party, interacting with the popular masses, must work toward the development of a political consciousness and a collective will, corresponding to the elaboration of a historically grounded ideology of transformation. If the aim is the revolutionary seizure of power, it is also true that the subaltern classes, in order to be successful, must work towards creating the conditions for transformation, aiming to be an ideologically hegemonic class well before becoming the dominant social group. The socialization of the means of material production is only one aspect of the revolutionary process, which must be associated with the socialization of the means of cultural and intellectual production. As Buci-Glucksmann observes (1979), Gramsci's thought goes beyond the mere culturalistic reinterpretation of classical Marxism, and this makes of him a theorist of political forms of transition defined by the dialectical relationship between social forces. From this point of view, we believe that the Gramscian categories can be articulated into the framework of a sociology of political praxis. The general sense of political praxis is the affirmation of the collective will, which becomes the hermeneutic canon of Gramscian historiography but, as Salamini observes (1981, 22), the structure of this praxis «is a dialectical unity of objective and subjective elements, of structural and superstructural activities, of materialism and idealism. Its major protagonists are the masses, the intellectuals, and the party. Its point of direction is the creation of hegemony».

Charles Tilly, on the other hand, is very attentive to the need to develop historically rooted social theories. Theories are for him a kind of working tool kit whose usefulness can certainly vary, yet, they contains the key to loosen recurrent explanatory knots. They provide always useful instruction even when they are bad instructions. In fact, «some of those instructions are worthless, some are misleading, and some are good. But it is normally better to have a bad tool than none at all» (Tilly 1981, 11). Also a bad theory can, in fact, suggest useful pathways and produce shared modes for the resolution of important issues. In this regard, Tilly makes the example of the social differentiation theory developed by Durkheim. Although, he says, it has shown its ineffectiveness, it has been a beacon for sociological analysis by providing important tools for historical interpretation:

> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim elaborated a theory of social differentiation and its consequences. The theory includes, among other things, a sort of race between differentiation and shared beliefs: If society's shared beliefs accumulate faster than it differentiates, change is orderly; if differentiation proceeds faster than shared belief, disorder (suicide, industrial strife, protest, sometimes even revolutions) results. Durkheim's theory is bad […] it not only generates invalid historical analogies (for example, between individual crime and collective protest) but also misstates the causal similarities among situations (for example, different streams of rural-to-urban migration) that are, in fact, analogous. (ibid.)

But there are also some good theories. Tilly, in this regard, makes the example of the theory of dual power developed by Leon Trotsky. The Russian intellectual, in his attempt to explain the social conditions of revolutionary phenomena, states that a prerequisite for revolution is the existence of an alternative concentration of power in the dominant system of power (Trotsky 1965). A sort of counter-government to which people can divert their obedience when the existing government demonstrates its incompetence and intolerance. This approach is undoubtedly correct and it proves to be not only a good theory but a historically grounded theory. Not by chance, Trotsky carries out his analysis through a comparative study of three revolutionary phenomena, the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, the French Revolution of 1789, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The selection of three case studies limits the theoretical domain of Trotsky's assertions since his conclusions are not applicable, as he himself admits, outside a context characterized by a strong, autonomous and centralized national state. Such restrictions on the possibility of extending generalizations are in fact the price that all theories rightly accepting the challenge of historical contextualization have to pay. It is evident that the potential role that

the social sciences can play in the context of historical research is undoubtedly important. Alternatively the social sciences risk becoming a large gallery of theories and concepts relating to completely abstract causal analogies and potentially unnecessary to the understanding of historical and social phenomena.

2. Against evolutionary sociology and structural-functionalism

In order to develop their ideas, both scholars react to the theoretical paradigms of their times. Whereas Gramsci, consistent with the evolutionistic conceptions of the social science in the nineteenth century, strongly opposes Marxist determinism, Tilly harshly criticizes the functionalist paradigm, which is the natural continuation of nineteenth-century evolutionism. In particular, Charles Tilly feels compelled to question the approach of Durkheim who, with his emphasis on differentiation processes seen as the peculiar traits of modernity, would strongly influence the subsequent development of social theory in a functionalistic sense.

Sociology and Marxism, for Gramsci, have reached a state of stagnation. They have abandoned their original ideological function dissolving in the positivist framework. Sociology has become the science of the particular, engaged in producing detailed descriptions and sterile classifications. It has become an a-moral, a-political and a-historical science. It represented an attempt to create a method for historical-political science subordinated to evolutionistic positivism, an effort to describe and classify historical and political facts in accordance with the logic of natural sciences. It therefore represents the effort to experimentally obtain the evolutionary laws of human society, in order to produce predictions on the future of humanity. Yet, Gramsci observes, sociological laws have rarely had a causative significance, yet they risk falling into tautology by describing an event or a series of events and, through a mechanical process of abstract generalization, they risk turning a mere relationship of similarity into a law (Gramsci 1977a, *PN*11, 159-163).

Actually, everything is born from a need, which Gramsci does not hesitate to define «somewhat childish and naïve» way to solve the practical problem of the predictability of historical events. Since the natural sciences seem to have the ability to predict the evolution of natural processes, also sociology has been regarded as scientific only when it was able to predict the

future of society, thus going back to the essential cause of socio-historical events. But even Marx, in his *Thesis on Feuerbach*, has the opportunity to criticize this simplistic concept, because in the human world only «struggle» may reasonably be expected, not its concrete moments that are usually the result of conflicting forces, not reducible to some static quantities, because, inside them, quantity continuously becomes quality (ibid., 173).

Obviously, Gramsci's knowledge is limited to the sociology developed by classical theorists such as Montesquieu, Comte, Spencer and Durkheim. The conditions of their approach are essentially based on the belief that society, despite the diversity of cultural forms and social organizations, obeys an essential and objective order recognizable in a body of laws that bind certain structural elements in a harmonious whole. The task of sociology is, therefore, to identify those social relations that take place in such order. But the problem about the concept of science lies for Gramsci in understanding whether and to what extent it can offer "certainty" of the objective existence of reality outside the subjects. According to Gramsci, scientific work has two fundamental aspects: one that constantly rectifies the world of knowledge by developing complex principles of induction and deduction, and another one that uses this complex instrumental apparatus to distinguish what is necessary from what is arbitrary, that is transitional. Within this logic, all that is determined by all men, and therefore independent from the point of view of any individual or group, becomes objective. Yet, also this certainty is actually a world vision, therefore ideological. Objectivity is a non-sense if we think of it in absolute terms, while its value increases in its relationship with real social conditions. It is a unifying but not always absolute element.

Scientific truths are never final. Otherwise, science itself would cease to exist as such to become an extension of the already known. Therefore, even science is nothing but a historical category, that is, a movement in constant development that does not allow any form of «metaphysical unknowable», thus reducing the unknown to a simple «non-knowledge», which also means «not yet known». If we accept this assumption, what matters in science is not so much the objectivity of reality but the men who devise their research methods and rectify their material means of detection and discrimination through the mediation of technology. Considering science as the basis of life, as a worldview *par excellence* that places man in the face of reality as it is, is still a mistake, because science itself is an ideology, e-

ven if in the world of superstructures it plays a privileged role, due to the particular importance, the widet extension and the continuity of development that its reaction has on the structure. (ibid., 68).

Some say that Gramsci comes to a complete formulation of the philosophy of praxis also through a systematic critique of the Marxist positivism of Bukharin who, in his *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, clearly expounds his deterministic conception based on the belief of the existence of laws of historical necessity (Bukharin 1921, en.tr. 1965). According to Gramsci, Bukharin's is a vulgar interpretation of Marxism in which the concept of the dialectical development of history disappears. Whereas idealist philosophy focuses on metaphysical categories, in Bukharin's sociology, ideas are replaced by empirical, as well as abstract and a-historical, canons and classifications. For Bukharin, economic processes operate regardless of the human will and therefore, according to Gramsci, outside history. By eliminating the dialectical relationship between economic processes and human consciousness, Bukharin dismisses the active element in the historical processes of the collective will. For Gramsci, instead, laws are always tendential laws, in the sense that they do not reveal what is fixed and immutable but always trends and possibilities. From this point of view, the deterministic Marxism of Bukharin becomes fatalistic, thus sanctioning the inertia of the masses and their subordination to historical regularities. For Gramsci, on the contrary, Marxism does not condemn the masses to a condition of cultural liability but aspires to human emancipation achieved through the adoption of a critical and historical methodology.

Whereas positivist Marxism emphasizes a certain historical mechanicism by eliminating the role of politics in the process of social transformation, for Lenin, the Russian Revolution demonstrates the ability of politics to produce mobilization and transformation. By supporting the primacy of politics, he actually supports, like Gramsci, a certain dialectical relationship between economic structure and ideological superstructure. From this perspective, Gramsci focuses on the role of the superstructures, following the approach outlined by Lenin. He does not downsize the historical role of economic structures; rather, he restores a proper balance between economic processes and political processes. The relations of production no longer act in the wake of general and autonomous laws; they are regulated and altered by human consciousness. The economical moment of social consciousness constitutes the negative phase, a sort of «realm of necessity» in the ascend-

ing process of the subaltern classes toward a hegemonic situation, which instead represents the positive phase, that is, the «realm of freedom» (see also Nardone 1971). In reality, Gramsci develops and overcomes Leninist thought by focusing more on the element of cultural and ideological rather than on political hegemony. According to him, certain superstructural elements, such as social awareness, culture, ideology represent both a tool and an aim of the revolutionary process. In this sense, the concept of «hegemony» is equal to that of ideological and cultural direction. The proletariat must become the ruling (that is hegemonic) class well before becoming the dominant class (Gramsci 1977b). The supremacy of a social group in fact manifests itself as «domination» and as «intellectual and moral direction». This group can and have to exercise a role of leadership before gaining power. From this point of view, Gramsci is aware that the Russian revolutionary experience is not exportable to the West, where no transformation process can be separated from the consent of the masses. In this sense, an ideological revolution acts as a precondition of the political (and social) revolution (see Portelli 1972).

What is needed in the West is the formation of a «historical bloc» determined by an organic unity between structure and superstructure, in the sense that the complex set of ideological superstructures is a reflection of the social relations of production. Between the two elements there exists a need for reciprocity, which is precisely the real dialectical process (Gramsci 1977a, 48). The historical bloc is not a sort of amalgamation or alliance between different classes, but a hegemonic situation in which social cohesion is ensured by a new conception of the world (superstructural dimension) and a dominant social group (structural dimension). In this context, the dominant power of a given social group is not guaranteed by violence and by the monopoly of the means of production, but mainly by a more subtle process of gaining consensus in relation to other social groups. What seems to be of interest to Gramsci is not so much the organization of class relations, but the mechanisms through which this organization is created and perpetuated (Tamburrano 1969). Only through the establishment of a new intellectual order, subaltern social groups can be de-alienated. In this context, Antonio Gramsci's humanist and historicist conception is consolidated, and his philosophy of praxis becomes pure humanism, that is, a kind of dialectic anthropology in which knowledge is reduced to historical social relations that are political and ideological. For Gramsci, humanism corresponds, therefore, to the process of structuring human knowledge on the ba-

sis of the organized will of men. Rather than "nature", people are "consciousness" that develops through practical activity within a given historical context of organized social relations.

The sociological impact of these problems is evident. Gramsci *de facto* approaches a historical and humanist sociology of knowledge where there is a complete subordination of social phenomena to the critical consciousness of the masses (Gallino 1970; Pizzorno 1970). He agrees with the materialistic principle of the social (and structural) determination of knowledge, but he is also convinced that this knowledge, while reflecting objective historical conditions, cannot be objective in the same way. Historical objectivity is in fact achieved through an intersubjective consensus among men. In this sense, objectivity is always humanized and historicized. Only through a historical analysis it is possible to demonstrate objective reality, always seen as «humanly objective» or «historically subjective», where the concept of objectivity is declined as a «universal subjective». In fact, «man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole humankind historically unified in a unified cultural system». But this process of historical unification can only occur if the internal contradictions afflicting society disappear, as they are a precondition for the establishment of social groups in the struggle for hegemony through the development of different philosophical and ideological systems. «There is then a struggle for objectivity (to get rid of the partial and fallacious ideologies) and this fight is the same struggle for the cultural unification of mankind». It therefore seems clear that there can be no objectivity that is free of man, as stated in a certain metaphysical materialism. «We know reality only in relation to man and, since man is also historical development, knowledge and reality are also a historical development, and also objectivity is a development» (1977a, *PN*11, 181-182).

The same attention to the processes of organization and mobilization of the proletarian masses and the same criticism of a certain sociological mechanicism is recognizable in the work of Charles Tilly. According to him, the analysis of social change undertaken up to date, with rare exceptions, are mostly contaminated by theories and concepts developed in the nineteenth century. Yet those scholars came to build their intellectual equipment through a careful observation of the social reality in which they were immersed, characterized by profound demographic changes, by changes in modes of production and ways of organizing power. They focused on the concept

of "differentiation" understood as a dominant social process in the modern era, and developed conceptions of society largely organized around the idea of a delicate balance between the dynamics of differentiation and integration. According to Tilly, social sciences should adopt a new toolbox that can enrich our understanding of large-scale structures and social processes, leaving behind the kind of architecture used to understand intellectual structures and processes of a bygone era.

He undertakes this difficult path by wondering if and how the comparison between places, peoples, cultures and between social structures and processes over time may give a contribution to this ambitious intellectual mission. He analyzes a dense historical and sociological literature focusing on the comparative analysis of wide socio-historical structures and processses with the aim of demonstrating the inadequacy of old concepts and classical theories for an understanding of contemporary societies. First, he wonders what qualifies the concept of differentiation: undoubtedly the typical dynamics of modern urbanization, occupational specialization, expanding markets, widespread forms of education and in general all those processes that seem to create the conditions for an increasingly clear distinction between human beings. Second, he wonders what qualifies the concept of integration instead: in this regard, sociological literature refers primarily to a sense of similarity between individuals of the same society that originates from shared beliefs and traditions, from respect for authority, the generalized fear of any form of moral deviance and, generally, from all those cultural habits (and attitudes) that encourage individuals to reproduce the existing social structure (and system of power). According to this dichotomic perspective, if the various and inevitable processes of differentiation do not correspond to a boost directly proportional to the process of integration, the way is clear for various forms of social disorder which, on a small scale, can take the form of popular violence, madness, immorality, and crime, while, on a large scale, it can be expressed through different historical forms of rebellion, insubordination, and conflict. It seems clear that this emphasis on the concept of social order has been instrumental in reproducing, even in the social sciences, a certain model of society. «A victory of differentiation over integration produced a threat to bourgeois security» (Tilly 1984, 4). In sociology, this knowledge gives strength to the great dichotomies that have been proposed by the classics of social thought: status and contract, society and community, primary and secondary groups, mechani-

cal and organic solidarity. Each of these formulas displays the theoretical tension between differentiation and integration.

A superficial reading of the massive social changes occurred in the nineteenth century, in Tilly's view (1984, 11-12), resulted in at least eight «pernicious postulates» that gripped twentieth-century social thought. These assumptions are based on the following principles: 1) «society is a thing apart», in the sense that the world is divided into several societies that have more or less autonomous cultures, power structures and socio-economic structures ; 2) «social behavior results from individual mental events» variously conditioned by life in society; in this sense, the explanation for social behavior is reduced to an analysis of the impact of society on individuals; 3) «social change is a coherent general phenomenon» and, therefore, it can be explained as a whole, as if it were a monolithic block; 4) «the main process of large-scale social change leads distinct societies through a succession of standard stages», each stage is more advanced than the previous one; 5) «differentiation forms the dominant, inevitable logic of large-scale change»; 6) «the state of social order depends on the balance between processes of differentiation and processes of integration or control», meaning that, when social differentiation is too rapid or excessive, it tends to produce disorder; 7) «a wide variety of disapproval behavior – including madness, murder, drunkenness, crime, suicide, and rebellion – results from the strain produced by excessively rapid social change»; 8) «illegitimate or legitimate forms of conflict, coercion and expropriation stem from essentially different processes» of change and disorder on the one hand, and of integration and control, on the other.

Since no society can exercise total social control, these eight postulates encompassing the complexity of social beliefs, are for Tilly the result of misjudgements, and, most importantly, social behavior is not (or at least not exclusively) the result of the impact of society on the minds of individuals, but the result of the relationship between individuals and social groups. Social change is not quite a coherent and comprehensive process, but a useful general term to describe a series of interrelated processes. And, finally, stage theories of social change «disappear at the first observation of the real social life» (ibid.). These fallacious beliefs have led to the development of an artificial division between the social forces that push towards order (society, integration, satisfaction, legitimate control, progress, normality) and social forces that push towards disorder (individual mental events, disinte-

gration, tension, violence, decadence, abnormality). It is a dichotomic and Manichean framework that serves to affirm the fragility of social order and the consequent necessity and justification for forms of control and repression. It *de facto* expresses «the will of the power-holders – actual or would-be – to improve the people around them, by means of coercion and persuasion, at a minimum cost» (ibid., 13). But if this theoretical framework is actually inappropriate to grasp historical and social phenomena, besides hiding a clearly ideological substrate, how should we act to improve the logic and the tools of social analysis? Tilly has no doubt: «We should build concrete and historical analyses of the big structures and large processes that shape our era» (ibid., 14). Such analyses should not be abstract, but concrete, rooted in time and space, and they should be historical, that is, temporally limited to a specific era that inevitably affects the sequence of events and social behavior. Of course, stating that the eight postulates are wrong (or pernicious) is not enough; we need to explain the reasons why we say so. It is therefore worthwhile to explain this position.

The great achievement of sociology as an academic discipline has been based on the belief in the existence of a separate reality called "society". Only the configuration of an intellectual entity distinct from any other could justify the existence of a body of specialized researchers, thus conferring on the discipline its substantial autonomy as a "science of society", separate from all other sciences, particularly philosophy. Based on these premises, the scholars of the nineteenth century devised a discipline that had its own method, its own epistemology and a full conceptual apparatus. The same spirit would later originate a sort of division of labor among scholars who claimed to belong to one of the many disciplines that could be somehow related to the polyhedric system of the social sciences. In particular, the sociological task was to study modern and affluent societies. This aim, however, prompted social scientists to outline mostly fictitious structures and processes, starting with the totally artificial distinction between state and society, where society is anything that the state is not, even if enclosed in the geopolitical boundaries of a state.

The difficulties lie, in fact, in the very attempt to establish the boundaries of this delimited system called society. Is it really possible to identify these boundaries and, in particular, to ensure that they remain stable over time and space? How is it possible, *inter alia*, to determine these boundaries? As Tilly observes (ibid., 23), we cannot guarantee *a priori* that the boundaries

existing between nation-states or certain local communities will also mark the boundaries of interpersonal relationships, of a specific production system, of a delimited system of shared beliefs and, in general, of all those aspects that give meaning to an experience in society. Yet, without this guarantee, «the idea of a society as an autonomous, organized, interdependent system loses its plausibility» (ibid., 25). Rather, it would be convenient to abandon the idea of society as an autonomous system by adopting the alternative idea of «multiple social relationships», some of which are made on a local scale (from state to community), others on a global scale.

With reference to the second postulate, namely, that social behavior is largely determined by mental events, Tilly argues that it is undoubtedly convenient to think of the cognitive (individual) dimension as closely related to social life, or even as the crucial dimension to explain social behavior itself. Based on this conviction, it becomes easy to group individual consciousnesses into a single global mindset. Twentieth-century researchers relied heavily on this postulate. This is demonstrated by the increasing use of research techniques making use of questionnaire which provide statistical distributions of individual mental attitudes aggregated in social structures. Yet these research methods could be misleading because they generally confuse individual orientations with the sociologically relevant element of “social ties”. Life in society is not an expression of the sum of social atoms, but of a multitude of relationships, which should then divert attention to the construction of substantial informal social networks. Of course, Tilly comments (ibid., 27), the individual human being does exist and has its own specificity, in the sense that every individual social actors perceive their belonging to a network and their participation in various forms of relationship in different ways. Social relations are nothing but abstractions of multiple interactions between individuals. Yet, that is precisely the point: we don't make abstractions from individual behavior, but from a set of individual behaviors that simultaneously involve two or more social actors.

The third postulate is based on the belief that social change is essentially a coherent phenomenon. Nevertheless, Tilly observes, it would be really amazing to discover that a single and recurrent social process has historically governed the same logic of change on a large scale. The point is that social scientists don't have to explain some specific regularity such as the acceleration of falling bodies or the movement of celestial bodies. In the

social world, constantly uniform dynamics that can be explained, do not exist. Of course, «Many large-scale processes of change exist; urbanization, industrialization, proletarianization, population growth, capitalization, bureaucratization all occur in definable, coherent ways. Social change does not» (ibid., 33).

The fourth postulate is grounded in the notion of a sort of social evolution based on a succession of stages. «Social scientists once used stage models of social change as freely as blacksmith use their hammers» (ibid., 41). The various theories of modernization, of economic and political development are formulated by referring to such interpretative scheme, which is so effective at the organizational level of logical thinking, as it is flawed and misleading at the level of a concrete analysis of the processes of social change. It is based on an evolutionary macro-theory that wedges historical development in artificial mechanisms and in a progressive logic that is actually much less uniform than the one intended in prevailing sociological frames.

The idea underlying the fifth pernicious postulate, that differentiation alone can be identified as a kind of master process from which all others descend, is similarly misleading. The development of naturalistic and evolutionistic conceptions undoubtedly urged this belief, which, even in the nineteenth century, seemed justified by the occurrence of certain phenomena, such as social complexity, the increasing division of labor, the expansion of markets, which were easily ascribable to mechanisms of differentiation. All societies seemed destined to stumble along the same conceptual and organizational path that goes from simple to complex. Only the most diversified societies seemed destined to survive. Even Talcott Parsons, who at an early stage of his intellectual activity seemed to depart from certain evolutionist models, ended up embracing them. In 1937 he began his famous work, *The Structure of Social Action*, with a quote from Crane Brinton: «Who now reads Spencer? […] We have evolved beyond Spencer» (Brinton 1933, 226-227, quoted in Parsons 1937, 1). Parsons is therefore convinced that the Spencerian approach based on the idea of unilinear evolution, following an utilitarian and positivistic scheme, is to be considered definitely outdated, and nevertheless, at the end of his intellectual career, he seems to explicitly recall the concept of organic evolution. As he writes in an essay within a text specifically dedicated to comparison in the social sciences:

If human “history” consisted of a population of essentially unique “cultures”, as has been alleged, this consideration would indeed virtually eliminate the relevance of “comparative method”. But empirically, this simply is not the case; history consists rather, like the system

of organic species, of an immensely ramified "inverted branching tree" of forms at many levels of system reference.
What ties the "branches", forms, and levels together into a macro-system, is in the first instance common genetic origin. This is to say that differences among subsystems have, by and large, arisen through processes of differentiation from what in some sense have been "more primitive" forms. The human socio-cultural universe is by no means so variegated as, at least superficially considered, the organic seems to be, but it is by no means narrowly constricted (Parsons 1971, 102)

Also Parsons, in the above passage, besides recovering a clear evolutionist approach, embraces the idea of differentiation seen as the dominant social process. Tilly's (1984, 48) criticism of this postulate should not be understood as a denial of the importance of the process of social differentiation in socio-historical development. In his view, this awareness cannot be crystallized, thus hiding a reality that is also characterized by significant dynamics of de-differentiation, as clearly demonstrated by the various aspects of phenomena that have been conceptualized under the term "globalization". Actually, we cannot speak of a master process from which the others arise. The historical development is so complex and varied that any attempt to identify a dominant distinctive element would risk, as often happened, contaminating the analysis of concrete historical and social processes.

This critical consideration brings us to the sixth pernicious postulate based on the assertion of an oppositional dialectic between differentiation and integration, constituting the grounds on which the game of establishing social order would be played. Excessive or too rapid differentiation processes are therefore carriers of situations of structural disorder, which can be faced by increasing the integrative pressure guaranteed by social control and the subsequent repression by the political and moral authority of a given society. The result of this postulate is likely to be tautological as it relies on propositions such as «differentiation produces disorder whereas is equivalent to the absence of order». Actually differentiation undoubtedly produces tensions, but such tensions do not represent necessarily a threat to social equilibrium. Let's think about the dialectical conflict between capital and labor. Without it, Western societies would probably not have had a real social pressure towards democratization that is nothing but the aspiration for a new order of solidarity.

This brings us to the seventh pernicious postulate that is essentially based on the "equivalence" of different forms of disorder. Whole generations of social scientists, in fact, have seen very different phenomena – such as

crime, family instability, social movements and in general all those behaviors disapproved by the classical bourgeois culture – as similar expressions of social disorder. All are explained in terms of a sort of social malfunction brought about by too rapid changes, whose solution requires intense collaboration between social classes and political analysts. Some scholars consider these "problems" as the inevitable cost of social development:

> The very fact that modernization entrails continual changes in all spheres of a society means of necessity that it involves processes of disorganization and dislocation, with the continual development of social problems, cleavages and conflicts between various groups, and movements of protest, resistance to change. Disorganization and dislocation thus constitute a basic part of modernization and every modern and modernizing society has to cope with them (Eisenstadt 1966, 20).

This approach is clearly misleading because it assumes that an ordered society is also a static and non-conflictual society, thus neglecting the role of conflict in the production of social change.

All the postulates highlighted by Charles Tilly, therefore, are based on a clear separation between the sphere of order and that of disorder, which, in real political application, is reflected in the eighth and final postulate that relies on the distinction between legitimate force (that of established power) and illegitimate force, that is an expression of social disorder. All forms of challenge to power, from forms of rebellion to organized social movements, become illegitimate, while phenomena such as war, repression, prison, forms of taxation and, generally, all those phenomena aimed to produce integration by the dominant power become legitimate. As Tilly reminds us (1984, 56), these distinctions are fictitious and analytically impractical because the same actions may fall on either side of the demarcation line and only a political opinion (ie ideological) separates them. Let's think of a resistance movement against a foreign occupation: the actors involved will be considered terrorists by the political elites of the occupying power, and heroes of freedom by most of the people who are against the occupation. Even theoretically, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate force is likely to be mind-numbing, firstly, because it tends to reinforce the already refuted idea of the continuing tension between differentiation and integration, and secondly, because it tends to separate social phenomena that have many aspects in common, and that are generated from similar conditions. In reality, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate use of force, at least when forms of collective action are concerned, derives from

the forms of historical development of nation-states and from the way power is organized within them.

3. History meets the social sciences

The critical sociology of Antonio Gramsci takes shape in the rejection not only of positivist Marxism but also of Benedetto Croce's idealist philosophy. As a theorist of bourgeois liberalism, Croce played in Italy the same role Hegel played in Germany (Salamini 1981, 27). The human and historicist components of Croce's philosophy become a useful conceptual tool for Gramsci in his criticism of the Marxist mechanicism of the Second International. Although fascinated with Croce's statement on the historical importance of human values, Gramsci clearly distances himself from the Italian philosopher on the question of the role actually played by the masses in the process of historical determination. Croce's idealism is in fact unable to resolve the conflicting relationship between theory and praxis. According to Gramsci, by raising the concrete reality of social conflict to the level of ideas, the philosophy of Bendetto Croce becomes an ideological apparatus that justifies the existence of abstract, purely speculative and essentially a-historica values. When meta-historical values are regarded as absolute values, then metaphysics and pure theory take the place of real conflicts happening among men. As Salamini observes (ibid., 28), Gramsci's criticism of Croce's idealism can be summed up in four basic points: the concept (and conception) of historicism, the definition of philosophy, the conception of dialectics, and the relationship between theory and praxis.

Gramsci and Croce seem to agree on the historical and immanent role of ideas as well as on their criticism of theories not grounded in historical facts, but Croce, unlike Gramsci, gives a metaphysical value to history. When Croce says that ideas generate action and that man is the real creator of history, he actually refers to a hypostatized, that is, not historically determined, man (Croce 1907, en.tr. 1914; 1915). In Gramsci's opinion, men are the protagonists of concrete struggles, which are structured into real historical processes, by facing the objective reality of social contradictions. If for Croce historical creation is reduced to a history of ideas and concepts, Gramsci, like Marx, see historical processes mainly as praxis, that is, practical activity. Ideas become concrete in objective social conditions, and the history of science is not metaphysics, but a tool for creating historical con-

sciousness (Gramsci 1977a). Historicism is therefore understood by Gramsci as a kind of awareness of the role of history as an instrument for action and mobilization. From this point of view Gramscian Marxism is absolute historicism in its aim to reveal the sociological context of ideological systems (Badaloni, 1967, 101). Even dialectics, in Croce's idealism, is reduced to a dialectic between innovation and conservation and, in this sense, it has an immediate political impact, even if it represents the absolute negation of conflict. According to Gramsci, the conception of dialectics assumes in Croce an ideological value in that it excludes any immediate revolutionary alternative. The reduction of the real historical dialectic to a conceptual dialectic minimizes the role of politics in favor of aesthetics, economics, logic, regarded by Croce as true sciences. Politics, reduced to mere ideological passion and ideology, in Croce' s view, is not philosophy. Croce's classification of pure sciences may be valid, according to Gramsci, only in an utopian society, structurally and epistemologically unified, that is, in a classless society without conflicts, which, historically, is a non-sense. In societies characterized by dialectical conflicts between classes, political passion and ideologies become science. The history of philosophy is then, for Gramsci, the history of the conflict between alternative worldviews, and in this sense, philosophy itself becomes politics and the political science becomes the only science capable of resolving social conflicts (Gramsci, 1977a).

Gramsci's rejection of evolutionist bourgeois sociology does not dismiss the possibility of a sociology placed in the perspective of a philosophy of praxis (Gallino 1970; Pizzorno 1970). What Gramsci criticizes is not sociology *tout court* but the ideological function of positivism and Croce's idealism. If sociology would give up the attempt to develop a system of absolute, objective laws, it might give an essential contribution to the understanding of the origins and conditions of socio-cultural systems. In fact, every society has its own rationality that Gramsci does not deny. Thus, critical sociology is called upon to find this rationality and replace it with a system of rationality for the benefit of civil society. This is, therefore, a sociology of political praxis, a science that analyzes the conditions under which subaltern groups are formed, crystallized and work within a given historical bloc. Specifically, it has to analyze the historical process of formation of a given collective will (Buzzi 1969; Piotte 1970), starting from the awareness that the genesis of any social group is always characterized by a certain connection with the means of production, and that the end

point is always the political and cultural conquest of hegemony that is achieved when a given social group becomes a unifying and leading force also for other social groups. In this regard, the acquisition of a historical consciousness, the development of a political and intellectual class, the creation of new political organizations and worldviews, are for Gramsci the most important superstructural elements in a sociological framework.

At this point, Gramscian sociology coincides with Charles Tilly's historical sociology. According to Tilly, the approaches of sociologists and historians to the analysis of social events are different, but there are good reasons to try to identify the parameters for a practical synthesis of the two approaches based on the need to develop historically grounded social theories. Such an effort necessitates our careful reflection on the merits of historical research. First, we should restore some conceptual order by affirming the importance of the work of historians. There have been, especially in sociology, scholars who expressed their conviction of being able to analytically capture social cases without knowing their historical origins, namely the specific contexts from which these cases emerged. This sociological effect is clear in the following words by Lipset:

> From an ideal-typical point of view, the task of the sociologist is to formulate general hypotheses, hopefully set within a larger theoretical framework, and to test them. His interest in the way in which a nation such as the United States formulated a national identity is to specify propositions about the general processes involved in the creation of national identities in new nations. Similarly, his concern with changes in the patterns of American religious participation is to formulate and test hypotheses about the function of religion for other institutions and the social system as a whole. The sociologist of religion seeks to locate the conditions under which the chiliastic religion occurs, what kinds of people are attracted to it, what happens to the sects and their adherents under various conditions, and so on. There are clearly no problems of the historian. History must be concerned with the analysis of the particular set of events and processes. Where the sociologist looks for concepts which subsume a variety of particular descriptive categories, the historian must remain close to the actual happenings and avoid statements which, though linking behavior at one time and place to that elsewhere, lead to a distortion in the description of what occurred in the set of circumstances being analyzed (Lipset 1968, 22-23).

As Tilly (1981, 5) observes, the question of the division of labor between sociologists and historians, as placed by scholars such as Lipset, is essentially similar to that «between the mycologist and the mushroom collector, between the critic and the translator, between the political analyst and the city hall reporter, between brains and brawn. History does the transcription, sociology the analysis». This is a clear mystification to which, it should be

said, historians have often contributed, as we can see from these words by Gareth Stedman Jones:

> Attitudes toward sociological theory among sociologically inclined historians have often verged on the credulous, and although more critical sociologists might have rejected as naively positivist any distinction between history and sociology which sees the one as "idiographic" and the other as "nomothetic", many of these historians have behaved in practice as if they considered such a division of labour to be legitimate. Defensive about their own subject and repelled by an inadequately understood Marxism which appeared to be the only other contender, they have looked uncritically to sociology as a theoretical storehouse from which they could simply select concepts most serviceable for their individual needs (Stedman Jones 1976, 300).

History cannot be seen as a kind of failed sociology, as well as historical materials cannot be treated as raw evidence waiting to be sociologically analyzed. In this regard, Charles Tilly offers a double argument through a distinction between «matters of fact» and «matters of principle» (Tilly 1981, 6). On a strictly factual ground, historians conduct their investigations following some rules that differ significantly from those governing social science research, as well as historical materials generally differ from those used in sociology. In terms of principle, it should also be said that any analysis of social processes is equally historical. In fact, an analysis is historical only when it takes into consideration the time and the place of the action in his explanations. From this point of view, the classic distinction between "generalizing" (or nomothetic) and "particularizing"(or idiographic) disciplines is not adequate. Historical analysis must be characterized by the integration of time and space. It is mainly the sociological analysis of change on a large scale to have an insufficient historical awareness. Therefore, sociological theory needs to be grounded in history, that is, embedded in time.

Both sociologists and historians, while following partially different logics, cannot refrain from seeking more adequate theories to investigate historical and social contexts. To achieve a similar result we should further explore the terrain of history. As Tilly observes (ibid., 12), the word "history" refers, at the same time, to a «phenomenon», to «a body of material» and to a «set of activities».

As a phenomenon, history represents the cumulative effect of past events on present events. Let us think of the phenomenon of industrialization; scholars are divided between those who believe that the processes of capital accumulation, economic growth, exploitation of labor force, recur in a

number of countries, following more or less the same lines, and those who believe that these processes vary depending on the mode of industrialization of the countries that first initiated the dynamics of accumulation. Only the members of the first group can obviously adopt common procedures for synchronic comparison, since they assume the irrelevance of the temporal dimension; the members of the second group will avoid those forms of cross-sectional comparison, paying greater attention to the dynamics of historical development.

Seen as a set of materials, history appears as a persistent and residual body of past behaviors that can be brought to light through old news reports, witnesses' accounts, autobiographies and other narrative materials that may represent a small slice of past experience. Historians have generally focused primarily on written evidence, although any remnant of the past, from working tools to graffiti left on walls, can constitute a small fragment of a past life.

Viewed as a set of activities, history is an attempt by scholars to reconstruct the past. An attempt that, according to Tilly (ibid., 13), is likely to be hopeless for two reasons, which, after a little reflection, will actually appear obvious. First, the availability of information on the past is likely to be almost inexhaustible, exceeding the effective capacity of even the most slavish historian to collect and synthesize them in a comprehensive way. Historians are compelled to make a choice by selecting only a small portion of the material available to them. Second, historians have to pick just a few of the many events occurred in the past, depending on the specific question on which the research design is built. Once the objectives of the survey are clearly defined, other information that is not closely related to them may be deemed irrelevant. In a few words, historical writing is based on the following aspects: those who commit themselves to this work specialize in the reconstruction of past behaviors; they rely mainly on narrative texts that represent the remnants of the past; they emphasize only selected pieces of text taken as the most suitable means to perform the task of reconstruction; they consider "where" and especially "when" some specific events are relevant for their impact on social life, and may therefore constitute essential elements for their own explanation. The fact that the function of historical work is easily identifiable, does not mean it will always proceed according to an ordered pattern:

In reality, the practice of history resembles a zoo more than a herbarium, and a herbarium more than a cyclotron. In a Cyclotron a huge, costly, unified apparatus whirs into motion to produce a single focused result; history does not behave like that. In a herbarium, a classificatory order prevails; each dried plant has its own niche. Historians divide their subject matter and their styles of thought into diplomatic, economic, intellectual, and other sorts of history, but the divisions are shifting, inexact … and often ignored in practice (ibid., 15-16).

However, stating that historical practice is often methodologically inconsistent and inaccurate, does not mean that historical processes are without meaning for the social sciences. Many social-scientific disciplines that have developed as if the historical origins of social phenomena were of no importance – particularly anthropology, sociology and political science – feel the need of restoring their historical connections. In particular, sociology has long perfected its methods in opposition to history and, Tilly points out (ibid., 37), by placing itself outside the effort – typical of scholars of the nineteenth century – of understanding and controlling the origins and the features of industrial capitalism, an effort somehow shared by authors such as Marx, Tönnies, Durkheim and Weber. Previous sociologists were primarily concerned to place historical experience within macro-sequences, such as Comte's theory of the «three stages of thought» (theological, metaphysical and positive), or Spencer's «evolution theory», according to which humanity is engaged in a long historical march on the path of differentiation from a «military stage» to an «industrial stage». With the development of sociological practice, especially during the twentieth century, the historical content of social processes was gradually dried up in the illusory attempt to create a sort of natural (a-temporal) science of society. Only in the sixties and in particular the seventies of the twentieth century, eminent sociologists would rediscover a taste for historical connections, especially in dealing with important issues such as industrialization, control of forms of rebellion and revolution, and family structure. A taste for historical and comparative analysis of large-scale processes of change began to spread among some social scientists, mainly because of some disappointment over the ineffectiveness shown by classical models of modernization and development.

Sociological analysis has often had to undertake the study of history when dealing with two areas: first, large-scale structural change, and second, collective action with particular reference to the analysis of social movements, rebellions and revolutions. The search for general patterns for the processes of industrialization, rationalization or political development brings the scholars to make a double effort: on the one hand, they must identify the

traits of great processes of change in specific historical periods, and on the other, they must connect specific transformations that were taking place in those times to the macro-processes of change previously identified. The attempt to formulate some general laws underlying revolutions or social movements, therefore, involves the need to find some regularities in collective action in specific historical periods. According to Tilly (1981, 44), in our time, the two macro-processes to consider are undoubtedly represented by the expansion of the capitalist system and the development of nation states (as well as by the resulting system of states).

If we agree with this idea, the historical problem we have to face lies in the need to determine how and why processes of capital accumulation occurred with the resulting dynamics of proletarianization; how and why the system of production relations spread, and finally what consequences resulted from this expansion. The temporal element here is essential and historical analysis indispensable. Moreover, there is the question of the nation state, understood as a complex organization in a position to monopolize the means of coercion in a specific territory. The nation state is autonomous, centralized, and its lines of internal division are formally coordinated, making it different from other organizations working in the same area. From this point of view, States are a relatively new phenomenon, since we can detect their traces only in the past few hundred years. Even the international political context, in Renaissance Europe, was largely characterized by formally independent political units, which were far from resembling the system of states typical of our times. Modern states can be historically analyzed both in their internal dimension, by focusing on the dynamics through which some organizations manage to exercise a certain domination over the populations of a given territory, gradually becoming a State, and in the external dimension, by observing how those organizations defend their domination against pressure from outside organizations (other States). In both dimensions the question of War becomes crucial. Internally, war pushes rulers to exert heavy pressure on their people in terms of taxes, conscription and requisitions; externally, it leads them to pursue war efforts through which they can affirm their right to exclusive control over a given territory.

From this context, emerge the classic questions of political sociology that link Gramsci to Tilly: how can the ruling class maintain control over the economic life and the political apparatus in a given area? Under what conditions can the population be active, organized and informed with respect to

national politics? How are riots, rebellions and revolutions enacted? And so on. In this way, we can take the asymmetries of power and participatory processes as a historical problem to be connected to the two macro-processes represented by the development of states (and the systems of States) and the expansion of the capitalist system of production. As Tilly points out (1981, 46), state and capitalism provide the framework for a historically rooted analysis of collective action and of the ways by which individuals act together in pursuit of shared interests. «Instead of the eternal behavior of crowds, we study the particular forms of action that people use to advance claims or register grievances. Instead of laws of social movements, we study the emergence of the social movement as a political phenomenon. Instead of power in general, we study the modalities of power within a certain mode of production» (ibid.). In particular, the two macro-processes influence the direction of change by acting on three fundamental components of collective action: the "interests" for which individuals decide to act collectively, their "capacity" to act in defense of those interests, and the "opportunity" to advance or defend those interests through the development of coordinated collective action.

4. Historical comparison as a sociological instrument

Antonio Gramsci's historical sociology cannot disregard the use of comparison as a privileged instrument of knowledge. As above mentioned, he is interested in understanding the reason why, in Italy, a revolution on the Soviet or Jacobin model is impossible. His interpretation, the result of a careful comparative analysis, can be ascribed to the role of intellectuals and to the structure of civil society.

Gramsci distinguishes between organic and traditional intellectuals. The first are those whose origins coincide with those of the social group they wish to represent. They are defined according to the functions conferred on them by the social group from which they originate in economic and political, as well as cultural and ideological spheres. Organic intellectuals represent a function of the interests of a class, but also an instrument of social transformation. Traditional intellectuals, on the other hand, seem to be the expression of an uninterrupted historical continuity. Their *raison d'être* is based on the autonomy of their past and on the need to reproduce their caste-like position in contemporary society. What really defines traditional

intellectuals is the dialectically negative response to new social groups. Their autonomy is in direct opposition to the progressive aspirations of emerging social forces. At this point, for Gramsci, the central issue becomes a comparative analysis of intellectual blocs within concrete historical blocs, as were those emerged in European societies. In particular, his focus is on the bourgeois hegemonic capacity in France, Italy, England and Germany.

In France, the central element of the struggle of the bourgeoisie against the landed aristocracy is represented by the contrast in terms of superstructure between bourgeois organic intellectuals and the Church. In that context, a progressive bourgeoisie was able to erode the feudal economic and institutional structures, giving rise to a capitalist mode of production. Such a structural process would not have happened if it had not been accompanied by an ideological movement opposing those traditional intellectuals who had found in the ecclesiastical institutions their strongest allies. The tactics of the bourgeoisie were meant to get rid of traditional intellectuals and, at the same time, to assimilate them. In this way, the French bourgeoisie were able to build a new historical bloc impermeable to repeated attempts at restoration.

In Italy, instead, the bourgeoisie began to form around the eighteenth century, that is the era of medieval municipalities and city-states. Although they tried on various occasions to displace the political domination of the aristocracy, they were never able to transcend their corporate stage to become the hegemonic social group. The bourgeoisie failed in the attempt to create their own organic intellectuals capable of addressing the power of the Church as well as traditional intellectuals. The failure of the Italian bourgeoisie led to the formation of small states ruled by the old aristocracy, thus blocking for several years the process of modernization. The same process of the Italian Risorgimento, which would take place almost a century after the French Revolution, would be led by moderates able to exert a strong power of attraction also towards democratic intellectuals close to the Action Party. The Italian middle class has always remained an elite and therefore it has never sought the consent of the masses which, according to Gramsci, constitute the only possibility to ensure a real process of social transformation.

In England, middle class patterns of development differs from the French and the Italian cases. Here the bourgeois revolution was accomplished

through a fusion of old and new hegemonic groups. The old aristocracy retained certain formal privileges, becoming the intellectual stratum of the new bourgeoisie. In this context, the new staff of the ruling bourgeoisie was also formed by elements of the old feudal classes who participated in the process of building new forms of economic power in the industrial and financial world. Thus, what made the dialectic between progressive and traditional intellectuals possible? Gramsci suggests a line of research. At the economic-corporate level, the English bourgeoisie created a stratum of organic intellectuals who tried to exorcise their own weakness by incorporating the old landed aristocracy within State administration.

The industrial development in Germany has some aspects that are similar to the English pattern. Here, too, the middle class emerged from an almost feudal social context by using the dynamics of fusion between old and new hegemonic groups achieved through a clear division of roles. The German bourgeoisie assumed the role of industrial and economic direction, leaving the role of intellectual and political direction to the old Junker aristocracy. Like in England, the bourgeoisie was not able to produce an organic intellectual class that would be strong enough to assume a hegemonic role by itself.

According to Gramsci, the French, English and German cases are three models of bourgeois revolution carried out in the strategic conflict between traditional and organic intellectuals. He contrasts these cases with the failure of the Italian bourgeoisie focusing mainly on the comparison between Jacobin France and the Italian Risorgimento.

All the problems inherent in the connection of the different currents in the Italian Risorgimento may be ascribed, for Gramsci, to the fundamental fact that the moderates represented a relatively homogeneous social group, so their political leadership underwent limited fluctuations, while the Action Party didn't support any historically determined social group, so that the oscillations of its ruling class were eventually shaped by the interests of the moderates. In fact the supremacy of a social group can manifest itself in two ways: either in the form of «domination», or in the form of «intellectual and moral direction». A social group tends to "dominate" the opposing groups and seeks to wipe them out through military force, while it tends to "lead" similar or allied groups. A social group, however, must be able to exercise leadership even before winning governmental power. After gain-

ing power, that group becomes dominant, but it must also be able to maintain its ruling position.

The political history of the moderates during the Italian Risorgimento proves the truth of this assumption. They were the ruling class well before being the dominant class and this allowed them to rise to power by exerting hegemonic force with no need for excessive material force. In this sense, the Risorgimento in Italy was organized in the form of a «revolution without revolution», that is a «passive revolution» (1977c, PN19, 87-88).

The moderates were able to establish their hegemony by adopting "liberal" means, that is, through individual initiative at a molecular level, thus without a party program developed according to a plan that precedes action and organizational practice. The field of the moderates was made up of intellectuals who had already well developed their organicity to the social groups of which they were the expression. They were intellectuals, politicians and business managers and, at the same time, big farmers, entrepreneurs and industrialists. Given these conditions, they exercised a great «spontaneous» power of attraction on the whole body of intellectuals of any rank. From this context, Gramsci claims, emerges the methodological consistency of a criterion for historical-political research: «There is no independent class of intellectuals but each social group has its own class of intellectuals or tends to form it; but the intellectuals of the progressive class, in the given conditions, exercise such a power of attraction that ultimately they end up making subaltern the intellectuals of other social groups, and then by creating a system of solidarity with all the intellectuals through psychological (vanity, etc.) and often caste-like ties (legal-technical, corporate, etc.)» (1977c PN19 88-89).

This is accomplished in an almost spontaneous way when a social group assumes the features of a progressive class which enables the entire society to advance. When this social group ceases to fulfill its function, the entire ideological bloc that supports it tends to crumble, and spontaneity can be replaced by direct or indirect coercion, that is, through real police action or military coups.

In the context of the Risorgimento, the Action Party, because of its articulation was unable to exert such a power of attraction, therefore, it was itself subjected to attractions and influences, so much so that it was hesitant about accepting in its program some crucial popular demands, as such as

the agrarian reform. The Action Party, steeped as it was in the rhetoric tradition typical of a certain Italian literature, tended to confuse the cultural unity existing in the peninsula – limited, however, to a very thin stratum of the population mainly polluted by Vatican cosmopolitanism - with the territorial and political unity of the popular masses which were unconnected to that cultural tradition. For this reason, in Italy, the political action of the Actionists never reached the efficiency levels attained, for example, by the Jacobins in France. They fought in order to create a link between cities and countryside, and their defeat at some point in the historical development was due to the fact that they clashed with the demands of the Parisian working class, yet their long rhetoric tradition would continue in the modality practiced by Napoleon and, in a certain sense, by Herriot's and Daladier's radical-socialists.

The different interpretations of the Jacobin experience are not right on target. The very term "Jacobinism" has come to assume two meanings: the first, historically characterized, is that of a political party which sees the development of French life in a specific way and is based on a particular program; a party which performs its action through an energetic and resolute method derived from the occasionally fanatical belief in the soundness of that program (and that method). Hence the notion that a "Jacobin" is an energetic, determined and fanatical political man, confident in the miraculous virtues of his ideas. In this view, the sectarian element prevails on the awareness of a movement that succeeded in giving voice to the major demands of the popular masses connecting them with the element of national politics.

Actually, the Action Party, according to Gramsci, in order to really assume the character of a progressive group, should have been "Jacobin", not only in its external form of temperament, but also in its economic and social contents. In this way, the connection of the rural classes - which in Italy was realized by a reactionary bloc formed by clerical-legitimists intellectual classes - could also lead to the formation of a new liberal and national political force. But in order to do so, the Actionists should have accepted the basic demands of peasants by appealing to them and to the intellectuals of the lower strata of society.

The Jacobins conquered their function of ruling party through a strenuous fight. They imposed themselves on the French bourgeoisie leading them towards advanced positions. They exploited the situation by creating irre-

versible facts, «by hunting out the middle-class kick in the pants». The "Third state" was in fact the less homogeneous. It was made up of a disintegrated intellectual elite and an economically advanced but politically moderate social group. At first, its political action was limited to claims regarding corporate interests. Therefore, the forerunners of the Revolution were moderate reformers. In a relatively short time, however, a new elite came into existence that tended to see the bourgeoisie as a group exerting hegemony over all the popular forces. This was the result of a selection process that took place through the action of two factors: the resistance of traditional social forces and the international threat, two elements that without the vigorous and determined action of the Jacobins would have crushed the Third state.

The Jacobins opposed any intermediate halt in the revolutionary process, by physically eliminating not only elements of the old society but also moderate revolutionaries, who had by this time become reactionary. Therefore, on the one hand, the Jacobins represented the only revolutionary ruling party to represent the aspirations of the immediate (and corporate) French bourgeois interests; on the other hand, they represented the revolutionary movement as a complete historical development, since they encompassed also the future needs «of all national groups that had to be assimilated to the existing fundamental group».

They were without doubt as convinced of the validity of the rhetoric formula «freedom, equality and fraternity» as popular masses were. «The language of the Jacobins, their ideology, their methods of action perfectly reflected the needs of the time» even though today they might seem too "frenetic". Their first need was to destroy enemy forces or reduce them to impotence in order to prevent the emergence of counter-revolutionary forces. Secondly, they posed the problem of enlarging middle class cadres by placing them at the head of the national forces, thus creating a political-military relationship favorable for the revolution, and by limiting liability in areas where enemy forces could recruit their own army. Rural France was brought to accept the hegemony of Paris, realizing that the old regime had to form a bloc with the most advanced forces of the Third state, marginalizing the Girondins who represented the soul of moderation. Even if at one point the Jacobins forced their hand too much, they did it in the very sense of historical development. They not only organized the bourgeoisie but

made them the dominant and, at the same time, the ruling class, able to express a thoroughly bourgeois state.

The real problem of the Jacobins is that, until the end, they remained on a purely bourgeois ground, even when historical conditions were ripe for a further leap in quality. They refused to recognize the right of coalition to workers, continuing to enforce the Chapelier law. In this way, they broke the urban bloc of Paris and their assault forces were dispersed, bringing with them a feeling of disillusionment and disappointment. «In fact the Revolution had found the wider class limits. The politics of alliances and of the permanent revolution had ended by asking new questions that could not be resolved then, it had unleashed elemental forces that only a military dictatorship would be able to contain» (1977c, PN19, 104-107).

The reasons why a Jacobin party never emerged in Italy are to be found in the socio-economic fabric, that is, in the historical weakness of the bourgeoisie in the Peninsula. The result was that the supporters of the Italian Risorgimento were never able to arouse the enthusiasm of the masses and, for that reason, they did not fulfill any of the planned objectives. They obtained just «the miserable political life since the 70s to 900, the elementary and endemic rebellion of the working classes, the crude and stunted existence of a skeptical and idle ruling class (ibid., 117).

Tilly is very interested also in the dynamics of contention in France, as well as in the rest of Europe, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and devotes to the topic countless publications through which he perfects his theory of collective action that is now so well known to scholars of political sociology and social movements that it does not need further discussion (among the most illuminating texts, we should recall, Tilly 1964, 1978; Shorter, Tilly 1974; C. Tilly, L. Tilly and R. Tilly 1975). We are interested in the methodological approach that begins with Tilly's criticism of the dominant sociological paradigms to claim the need for social theories rooted in time and space and monitored by a constant recourse to historical comparison.

Having identified the eight postulates that tend to distort the sociological reading of historical and social processes, we must understand how they can be uprooted. On this point, Tilly proposes two approaches, a direct and an indirect approach. In the first case, it is necessary to "fight" the postulates on their own ground by observing the same logic that led to the de-

velopment of certain statements about the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence, or about the differentiation process as a master frame of social change. We must then compare them with actual historical cases trying to identify alternative readings. In the second case, which is closely connected to the first, it is necessary to look for forms of generalization that are rooted in historical processes. In this sense, we do not need to pursue universal statements, more or less confirmed by a variety of instances occurring in different places and at different times; rather, we need to connect a set of specific cases and variables to different periods and contexts, linking together similar cases, being always aware of their space and time limits. It is at this point that historical comparison becomes crucial to describe and explain structural dynamics and large processes.

The analysis of structures and processes is conducted, according to the systematization provided by Tilly, at four historical levels: 1) at a «world-historical level», the researcher's task is to identify the specific properties of an era, contextualize and fix them in the flow of human history. At this level, for example, we can find the different patterns of social evolution, the rise and fall of empires, the development and entrenchment of specific production patterns; 2) at a «world-systemic level», the researcher's task is to discern connections and changes in the most important part of a broad set of interrelated social structures; 3) at a «macro-historical level», the researcher must give an account of structures and processes also mentioning their alternative forms in graphic form; and 4) at a «micro-historical level», the researcher's task is to trace the connections of individuals and groups with such structures and processes, in the hope of being able to explain their impact on social life (Tilly 1984, 60-61).

Structures and processes are deemed relevant, therefore, depending on the level of analysis. At a world-historical level, the structures on which the attention of the researcher is focused are those generally ascribable to the category of world-system, while the relevant processes are related to the transformation and the historical sequence of systems understood in their entirety. At this level, any discourse on the processes of urbanization, industrialization and state-building would be inappropriate, as it would occur at a lower level than the wholeness of the world system. If a researcher chooses to operate at this level, any comparison, if necessary, should be based on a comparison between world systems and, as Tilly states, «My eyes falter and my legs shake on this great plan» (ibid., 63).

At a historical systemic level, the dimension of world system continues to have its importance even if, in this case, the scholar focuses on those world-system components that are based on networks of coercion and/or exchange. In the first case, the focus is mostly on the dimension of the nation state understood as a more or less centralized, differentiated and autonomous organization that has the capacity to control the means of coercion within a limited geographical area. In the second case, the researcher focuses on the patterns of production at a national or regional level, in particular, on the set of relationships between geographically segregated and interdependent individuals and groups that have certain factors of production. In this case, the most important processes are those related to the dynamics of production, distribution and subordination. The comparison is here intended to establish similarities and differences between networks of coercion and exchange, as well as between processes of subordination, production and distribution. At this level, Tilly points out, any attempt at generalization is dangerous, controversial and difficult to verify.

With the macro-historical level, according to Tilly, «we enter the ground of history as historians ordinarily treat it» (ibid.). Within a given world system, we can certainly build states, modes of production, army associations, enterprises, networks, by gradually giving body to our unit of analysis. At this level, processes such as proletarianization, accumulation of capital, urbanization, state-building, bureaucratization are suitable for our analysis. In this case, the comparative measure is based on a comparison between these units, through which structural and procedural uniformity, variations and combinations can be identified. Their systematic study in specific macrosystems fully falls within the logic of a historically rooted analysis that should be taken as the foundation of our cognitive activity.

This should not lead us to underestimate the dimension of micro-history. When we analyze the impact of structures and processes on individuals and groups, we will necessarily draw a connection between personal experience and historical process. In this case, the frames of reference concern the relationships between individuals and social groups while processes are related to the transformation of the relations between individuals connected to those structural dynamics. If the researcher works at a micro level, any distinction between interactions and relationships will lose some of its meaning. Comparisons between systems of relationship and their transformation take shape and consistency in the close link between those systems of rela-

tionship and structural and procedural dimensions. In other words, the relationship between capitalists and workers makes sense only within the broader historical process of proletarianization and concentration of capital. Charles Tilly, among the four levels of analysis, prefers to dwell on the comparisons conducted at the macro-historical level and particularly on that borderland which is realized in the connection between macro- and micro-historical dimensions.

Our objective is to identify a comparative approach able to account for the structures and processes that take place within a specific world system, so as to produce some limited – i.e., historically determined – generalizations. Since we aim to identify some regularity in such historical structures and processes, we do not need to analyze a large number of statistically treated instances. Comparative analysis of socio-historical processes and structures is most fruitful when we focus on a limited number of instances and «that is not because of the intrinsically greater value of small numbers, but because large numbers give an illusory sense of security» (Tilly 1984, 77). In the analysis of a small number of instances, the researcher has the opportunity to focus on the historical circumstances and the specific characteristics of each case, in order to identify some common features needed for comparison.

Even if we abandon society as our unit of analysis, it does not mean that we must abandon also the dimension of nation state; what we need is an awareness that our points of reference are a territorial area and a population controlled by the state institutional system and not a thing apart, as stated in the first pernicious postulate. Of course, researchers have some alternatives, meaning that, instead of the State, they can select different units of analysis, such as entire blocs of international powers, cities or city networks, regional modes of production, social classes, and so on. What is important for researchers is to have a clear idea of the objects of their analysis, before they produce any theoretical proposition.

Tilly distinguishes between different ways of comparing big structures and processes by classifying the different propositions one can potentially draw through comparative analysis. To do so, he combines two dimensions of comparison: one based on the «sharing of all instances» and one that is based on a «multiplicity of forms». The first dimension refers to those accounts that emerge from a comparison ranging from the analysis of a single event – aimed at highlighting the specific features of the case itself – to the

analysis of more instances – intended to bring out the characteristics of all the cases considered. The second dimension refers to those accounts that emerge from a comparison ranging from single – when all cases of a phenomenon have common properties – to multiple – when there are different forms of a phenomenon. By combining the two dimensions, four possible approaches to comparison emerge: «individualizing», «universalizing», «variation-finding», and «encompassing» comparisons. Individualizing comparisons are those that treat each case as essentially unique by minimizing the significance of any property in common with other cases. Purely universalizing comparisons, in turn, are based on the identification of common properties in all cases. On the other hand, we have those types of comparisons that are based on the search for possible variations (variation-finding) and, in particular, on the belief that we can establish a principle of change in the nature or intensity of a phenomenon starting from a systematic analysis of the differences between a number of instances. Encompassing comparisons are instead based on the analysis of different instances in different places within the same macro-system. The purpose of this form of comparison is to explain the characteristics of each case in the light of an evolving relationship with the system as a whole.

5. Contentious politics and democratic process

At the end of our comparative study, we can suggest some reflections on the thoughts of our two authors. Within the scope of this work, we have to leave out the specific studies conducted by Gramsci and Tilly, to concentrate our attention on their approaches and in particular on those aspects where we can find significant evidence of connection. We have seen that both authors assume an analogous starting point in their criticism of mechanistic and evolutionistic sociology in order to support the need for an analysis of social phenomena understood in their specific historicity. Both authors regard contentious politics as the central dimension in the process of historical development and, therefore, as a vital element of sociological interest.

Tilly's intellectual agenda is absolutely historical. His main objective is to understand how collective action evolved in Europe under the influence of major structural changes such as the processes of industrialization, urbanization and, in particular, the two macro-processes represented by the devel-

opment of the mode of capitalist production and the emergence and consolidation of nation states. Within the broader category of collective action, he focuses on the practices of public, confrontational and sometimes violent mobilization. His main focus is on the practice of uprising against economic and political power holders within national or regional communities. As Lynn Hunt points out(1984, 246), «Tilly emphasizes the creativity of the ordinary people, their ability to organize themselves and to defend their interests». The dimension of the interests is, in fact, central to the theory of Tilly and represents a discriminating factor in the conceptualization of collective action that he defines, in general terms, as the practice by which «people acts together in pursuit of common interests» (Tilly 1978, 7).

In order to implement his theoretical and empirical project, Tilly is forced to react to the functionalist approach of Durkheimian matrix by starting a dialogue with Marx as well as with Marxist theorists. He himself admits that since he began his long investigation into the practices of conflict, protest and collective action, his main purpose has been the accumulation of sufficient empirical evidence to refute the Durkheimian line, with particular reference to the concept of anomie and the dichotomy between integration and disintegration, through which contentious collective actions ended up being relegated to the broader category of social deviance (Tilly 1981, 95-108). This leads him to approach the Marxian elaboration without fully embracing it. He himself, in one of his most famous works, describes his analysis as «resolutely pro-Marxian» (1978, 48), agreeing with the attention paid by Marxists to the dimension of the interests rooted in the organizations of production and in the practices of conflict rather than of consent.

Tilly, however, goes beyond Marx, by placing his attention not so much on proletarians as such, but on those movement organizations on which their activism and the success of their mobilization depend. Moreover, Tilly, although following Marx in his concern for the developments of production models, does not limit his study to this aspect, he takes into consideration also other relevant structural processes such as urbanization and the formation and consolidation of nation states. This last element brings him slightly closer to the tradition of Weberian studies. Finally, unlike Marx and Gramsci, Tilly rarely focuses on the concept of class consciousness, turning his attention to the combination of interests and organization. What finally distinguishes Gramsci from Tilly is the attention for the theoretical dimension. Both strongly believe that no study design can be successfully pursued wi-

thout reference to a theoretical framework firmly rooted in historical processes. But, whereas Gramsci has no doubt in identifying the crucial points of this framework in the Marxist tradition which, freed from certain deterministic propensities, is configured in the parameters of the philosophy of praxis, Tilly, being inspired by all major sociological theoretical traditions, never refers to a single paradigm. In Tilly's view, in fact, theory is a fundamental research tool that is subject to change. It can be a helpful guideline for a socio-historical investigation; the evidence of real historical processes, however, should never be constrained in static conceptual cages. Theories, if we refer to them, should always be dynamic and, to a certain extent, flexible.

Even Gramsci, while claiming its full adherence to Marxism, opposes any form of structuralist orthodoxy and focuses mostly on the historical role of ideological superstructures, as well as on the importance of intellectual organization in the process of transformation, starting from the structural conditions determined by the relations of production. The organization of conflict against hegemonic systems of power is the focus of interest for both authors (in particular, see Tilly, Tarrow 2007; and Tilly 2007) who, through their proposal of historical comparison as a tool for social analysis, present themselves as supporters of a historical sociology of political processes in a dynamic path toward democracy understood, first of all, as a process of conflict between power holders (economic and political) and subaltern social groups.

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eISBN 978-88-8305-084-8 (electronic version)

http://siba-ese.unisalento.it

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Suggested Citation:

de Nardis F. (2011), "Historical Comparison and Political Contention. The Sociological Analysis of Collective Action and Political Praxis in Antonio Gramsci and Charles Tilly", *Center of Studies on Politics and Society - WP Series*, vol.1, issue 2, pp. 57-100.